THE PARALLAX FRAMEWORK

Character as Prose Permission and Constraint

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Abstract

This paper presents a methodology I have developed for fiction craft — the Parallax Framework — concerned with character design in limited-perspective, free indirect, and unreliable-narration contexts. Its origins are in drafting practice rather than theoretical abstraction: the problem it addresses is the persistent gap between knowing a fictional character and knowing what the prose is permitted to do when inhabiting or observing them.

Most character development tools in fiction pedagogy are descriptive: they specify who a character is. The Parallax Framework proposes that craft documentation should also be operational: specifying what the narration is permitted to do — what it may render, focalize, interpret, withhold, or leave for reader inference. A character, in this framework, is simultaneously a fictional person and a system of prose permissions and constraints governing narration behavior.

Central to the framework is the reader gap: the engineered asymmetry between what a point-of-view character understands about themselves and what the reader is positioned to infer. The paper situates the framework in relation to Genette's and Bal's focalization theory, Cohn's account of represented consciousness and free indirect discourse, Fowler's mind-style, and the reader-response theory of Iser and Rabinowitz. It does not claim to introduce these concepts. Its contribution is a named, document-based, sentence-level methodology — translating character psychology into operational prose rules — not commonly formalized in craft pedagogy in this form. The paper is positioned as a practitioner contribution to craft pedagogy with substantial theoretical engagement; the theoretical sections (§§3.1–3.5) provide scholarly context for a working method, not independent theoretical claims.

Keywords: *character design, focalization, free indirect discourse, narrated monologue, prose constraint, reader gap, Leerstellen, craft pedagogy, mind-style*

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1. Introduction: From Descriptive Character to Prose Governance

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The question that animates this paper arose for me from drafting practice: knowing a fictional character is not the same as knowing how to write one.

A writer may have developed their character extensively — psychological history, formative wound, desire, contradictory habitual behavior, distinctive voice. When they sit down to write a scene, that character document tells them almost nothing about what the prose should do. Should the narration name what the character is feeling? Should it interpret what the character perceives? Should it let the reader arrive at a conclusion the character cannot reach? Should interiority be rendered in depth or deflected into behavior and object?

These are sentence-level questions. They are not answered by psychological profile.

The gap is especially acute in a specific family of fictional modes: limited third-person narration with internal focalization, free indirect discourse, unreliable narration, and fiction in which the character's self-understanding systematically lags behind the reader's. In these modes, the texture of narration encodes the asymmetry the reader is invited to feel. Craft pedagogy has not commonly formalized, at the sentence level, how to design and maintain that asymmetry deliberately.

This paper proposes the Parallax Framework: a practitioner methodology for fiction craft that addresses this problem. Its theoretical claim is that character in the modes described above can be modelled not only as psychology or biography but as a system of prose permissions and constraints — rules governing what the narration may observe, name, interpret, withhold, or expose when inhabiting or observing that character. Its methodological claim is that these permissions and constraints can be formalized into operational character documents, translated into behavioral mechanics, and used as diagnostic tools during revision. Its synthetic claim is that these concepts draw on established work in narratology, stylistics, craft pedagogy, and reader-response theory, assembled here into a named methodology not commonly formalized in craft pedagogy as a sentence-level, document-based practice.

The paper does not propose a universal theory of character. Its scope is limited to fiction where the gap between character self-knowledge and reader inference is a primary dramatic resource. The theoretical sections that follow provide scholarly grounding for that working method, not independent theoretical contributions.

2. Defining Prose Permission and Constraint

The term 'prose' in this paper carries a specific meaning. In craft discussion, 'prose' often denotes style: the texture of a writer's sentences, their characteristic rhythms and diction. In this paper, 'prose' means the total behavior of narration at the sentence and scene level. This includes:

- What the narration renders — what it selects for description and what it passes over
- What is focalized — through whose perceptual perspective events are presented
- What is interpreted — whether what is rendered is assigned meaning by the narrating voice
- What is withheld — what the narration systematically declines to enter
- What the narration is lexically permitted to name — which words are available to the perspective
- What is reserved for reader inference — what is encoded in behavior and object rather than named

A prose permission is a rule specifying what the narration may do. A prose constraint is a rule specifying what it may not. Together they constitute a governance system for what narration performs when in proximity to a specific character.

This is distinct from voice. Voice is a property of stylistic signature: how the prose sounds. Prose permission is a property of epistemic access: what the prose is allowed to know and reveal. Two narrators may share a stylistic register while operating under entirely different epistemic rules — one permitted to synthesize freely from perception into emotional conclusion, the other restricted to rendering without interpretation. The stylistic similarity is fully compatible with different prose permissions, and this difference is what the Parallax Framework proposes to formalize.

3. Theoretical Context

3.1 Focalization

Gérard Genette's Narrative Discourse (1980) establishes the distinction foundational to this paper: the difference between narrative voice (who speaks) and narrative perspective (who perceives). His three types — zero focalization (access beyond any single character's knowledge), internal focalization (access limited to one character's perspective), and external focalization (restricted to external observation without interior access) — provide the structural architecture of perspectival restriction in fiction.

Mieke Bal's Narratology (1985; 3rd ed. 2009) refines Genette's account in a direction directly relevant here. Where Genette tends to collapse the act of perception into its textual representation, Bal separates the focalizer — the agent from whose position the narrative perceives — from the focalized object, and insists that focalization concerns not only who perceives but how perception is represented. This separation opens the question the Parallax Framework addresses: once we know who perceives, what governs the representation of that perception?

The framework's relationship to focalization theory can be stated precisely. Focalization specifies the architecture of perspective — the position from which the narrative sees. Prose permission specifies the epistemic rules operating within that architecture — what the narration is permitted to do with what the focalizing position delivers. A scene may be internally focalized through Character A under two entirely different sets of prose permissions: one narration permitted to synthesize from perception into emotional conclusion; another restricted to rendering without interpretation. Focalization theory does not address this difference. It falls below the level of focalization analysis, into the space the Parallax Framework occupies.

David Herman's Story Logic (2002) extends focalization into cognitive narratology, arguing that focalization is not merely a structural feature of text but a feature of how readers mentally simulate narrative worlds — whose consciousness they model in the act of reading. This cognitive dimension connects focalization directly to the reader-gap

mechanism: the reader is positioned to simulate a character's consciousness while simultaneously registering what that consciousness cannot see about itself. The gap is produced by the discrepancy between what the reader's simulation constructs and what the focalized character's self-model contains.

3.2 Represented Consciousness and Free Indirect Discourse

Dorrit Cohn's Transparent Minds (1978) provides the taxonomy indispensable to this paper. Cohn identifies three primary modes of consciousness representation in third-person fiction:

> **Psychonarration:** the narrator describes a character's mental state from outside the character's own idiom and evaluative register. The narrating voice retains its own perspective; the character's self-characterization is subordinate to the narrator's description. ('She was frightened, though she did not name it to herself.')
>
> **Quoted monologue:** direct interior speech, formally marked, clearly demarcating character voice from narrator. ('"I am not frightened," she told herself.')
>
> **Narrated monologue** — free indirect discourse (FID): the narration adopts the character's vocabulary, idiom, syntactic habits, and temporal perspective without formal quotation markers. ('She was not frightened. There was nothing to be frightened of.') Neither narrator nor character is clearly dominant; the evaluative perspective is structurally undecidable.

It is narrated monologue — FID — that is the primary mechanism of the reader gap. Its epistemological significance lies in its undecidability: the reader cannot determine with certainty whether the evaluation ('there was nothing to be frightened of') is the narrator's endorsement or the character's self-deception. The narration neither corrects nor confirms. This undecidable zone is where the gap lives.

The dual-voice quality of FID — its simultaneous sounding of narrator and character perspectives — means that irony can emerge from the space between those voices without

being formally marked. Prose permission, in this context, is a design specification for FID access: how deeply does narrated monologue penetrate this character's perspective? In which domains? What vocabulary does the character's FID voice have available, and what evaluative conclusions is it constitutively forbidden to reach? The operational character document formalizes these decisions before drafting begins, ensuring that FID functions consistently as a gap-maintaining tool rather than drifting across scenes.

3.3 Mind-Style

Roger Fowler introduced the concept of mind-style in Linguistics and the Novel (Methuen, 1977) to describe the way a fictional character's cognitive and ideological world is encoded in the language through which their perspective is rendered. Mind-style is not simply voice or idiosyncratic idiom; it is the totality of consistent structural properties — characteristic lexical choices, syntactic preferences, patterns of deixis, semantic field emphases — through which a character's way of perceiving and categorizing reality leaves systematic traces in the prose.

The relationship between mind-style and prose constraint is productive but asymmetric, and the distinction matters both theoretically and practically. Mind-style is an analytic concept: a way of describing what is already present in a completed text. Prose constraint is a design concept: a set of specifications for what should be present before the text is drafted. A well-executed and consistently maintained set of prose constraints should produce a distinctive and analyzable mind-style. The design precedes and enables the analysis.

But prose constraints address design decisions that mind-style analysis does not typically foreground. Structural absence — the deliberate exclusion of a character from interior access — produces no mind-style for that character in the conventional sense. There is no linguistic trace to analyze because there is no perspective to represent. Yet structural absence shapes reader inference as powerfully as any marked cognitive signature. Mind-style analysis has no account of what is not there; the Parallax Framework begins precisely with the decision about what to withhold.

Furthermore, the framework's operational constraints specify not only what a mind-style contains but where it is permitted to reach. A character's narrated monologue may display consistent mind-style properties in most domains while being constitutively constrained in one: the constraint 'this character's narration may not synthesize physical perception into emotional conclusion' produces a mind-style whose most diagnostic feature is a particular absence — an observable gap between perception and interpretation that the reader comes to read as suppressed interiority.

3.4 Unreliable Narration

Wayne Booth's Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) establishes the foundational distinction: an unreliable narrator is one whose account is undercut by the implied author — the normative governing intelligence reconstructed from the text as a whole. Subsequent scholarship has extended Booth's taxonomy to distinguish forms of unreliability relevant to the Parallax Framework's targets: characters who may accurately perceive events while systematically failing to interpret or evaluate them correctly — what rhetorical narratology calls misreading and misevaluation, as distinct from outright misreporting. The framework engages unreliable narration not as a category for classifying finished texts but as a set of conditions to be designed before drafting: the operational character document specifies the form and domain of a character's unreliability as a prose rule rather than leaving it to emerge accidentally.

3.5 Reader Inference and the Implied Reader

Wolfgang Iser's The Act of Reading (1978) provides the most precise theoretical grounding for the reader gap, and requires careful engagement.

Iser argues that literary texts are structured by two distinct types of open space. Leerstellen (gaps, or blanks) are structural absences in the text's paradigmatic arrangement — places where the text omits information that the reader is required to supply in order to construct the narrative. Indeterminacies arise where the text presents perspectives or statements that cannot be resolved into a single determinate meaning — not because information is missing but because the text's multiple perspectives fail to

converge. Both require reader participation: meaning is co-produced through engagement with what the text withholds or leaves open.

The reader gap in the Parallax Framework corresponds most closely to Iser's Leerstellen, but with a critical refinement. Iser's blanks are often locally undirected: they invite participation without strongly specifying its content. The designed reader gap is directionally structured: it does not tell the reader what to infer, but it constrains the inferential field through the specific evidence it presents and withholds. Behavioral residue, unexamined declaration, displacement channels — these are not random absences but shaped absences. They supply the reader with specific evidence while withholding the interpretive synthesis, directing inference without naming its destination. The design task is to calibrate this structure so that the inferential field is narrow enough to produce the intended understanding without being so marked that the narration becomes explicit.

Peter Rabinowitz's distinction between the 'authorial audience' and the 'narrative audience' (Before Reading, Ohio State University Press, 1987) provides further precision. The authorial audience is the hypothetical reader the author writes for: one who brings the appropriate cultural, generic, and literary competencies to the text. The narrative audience accepts the fictional world as real. The reader gap is designed for the authorial audience — it presupposes a reader competent to recognize unmarked irony in FID, to read behavioral residue as disclosure, to identify the significance of systematic domain-specific avoidance. Prose constraints are specifications about what evidence to give this authorial audience, and what interpretive work to leave to them.

Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities (Is There a Text in This Class?, Harvard University Press, 1980) explains why gap-inference varies systematically across actual readers. Reading competencies and inferential habits are shaped by the interpretive communities to which readers belong — defined by shared genre conventions, literary training, and cultural schemata. A reader trained in literary fiction may recognize the undecidability of FID as a signal to infer; a reader whose interpretive community expects transparent narration may read the same passage as stating fact. The Parallax Framework designs for a specific interpretive community; the ethical and practical risks (§12) arise when the actual reader population diverges from that implied

community. Iser himself acknowledges the risk of over-filling and under-filling gaps: the framework's revision diagnostic questions (§13) are tools for testing whether a designed gap is calibrated within the intended range.

4. The Parallax Framework: Scope and Definition

The Parallax Framework models character in limited-perspective fiction as a system of prose permissions and constraints: rules governing what narration may observe, interpret, conceal, misrecognize, or disclose when inhabiting or observing that character.

The framework takes its name from the parallax effect in rangefinder photography. A rangefinder camera's viewfinder and lens occupy slightly different positions; at close range, what the viewfinder sees and what the lens captures diverge. In fiction, an analogous gap exists between what the character's perspective presents and what the reader's inference produces. The framework is concerned with deliberately engineering that gap.

The framework makes three claims of different scope:

> **Theoretical claim:** Character in limited-perspective, free indirect, and unreliable-narration fiction can be productively modelled not only as psychology or biography but as a system of prose permissions and constraints — rules governing what the narration may do with the character's perspective.
>
> **Methodological claim:** These permissions and constraints can be formalized into operational character documents before or during drafting, translated into behavioral mechanics, and used as diagnostic tools during revision.
>
> **Synthetic claim:** These concepts draw on established work in narratology, stylistics, craft pedagogy, and reader-response theory, assembled here into a named methodology not commonly formalized in craft pedagogy as a sentence-level, document-based practice.

Underlying these three claims is a single principle: the most important content of a character in this kind of fiction is rendered through what the narration is forbidden to do directly. The reader gap, structural absence, behavioral mechanics, and character-specific prose constraints are not four parallel tools. They are four registers in which this one principle operates — each a different way of specifying what the narration must withhold, and what the reader must therefore supply. This principle is what unifies the methodology and distinguishes it from a collection of existing techniques applied simultaneously.

The framework is most applicable to: limited third-person narration with internal focalization; free indirect discourse; first-person narration with systematic self-deception or misreading; fiction where withheld interiority is a primary dramatic resource; and structural absence — characters who remain dramatically significant without receiving interior access. It is less applicable to omniscient narration that interprets freely, confessional first-person narration in which interiority is the primary subject, or genres where reader-gap design would violate reader expectations.

5. The Reader Gap and the Implied Reader

The reader gap is the asymmetry between what the point-of-view character understands about themselves and what the reader is positioned to infer about them. This is related to but distinct from classical dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is a gap in plot knowledge: the audience knows what the character does not. The reader gap operates in the domain of self-knowledge: the reader holds a richer model of the character's psychology than the character holds of themselves.

The gap is maintained through at least four prose mechanisms:

- Selective rendering: physical behavior and external detail are rendered with precision; interpretive synthesis is withheld.
- Unexamined declaration: the character asserts a belief about themselves that surrounding evidence contradicts; the narration does not correct it.
- Displacement: emotional content the character cannot name is carried by objects, physical sensation, or the behavior of others.

- Behavioral residue: the character does something that reveals more about their motives than they understand; the prose presents the behavior without authorial interpretation.

The gap test: at the end of a scene, does the POV character understand themselves more fully than the reader does? If yes, the gap has collapsed. The framework treats gap maintenance as a scene-level design discipline.

The gap is designed for Rabinowitz's authorial audience, but actual readers vary. Iser's account of over-filling and under-filling gaps captures the general risk; Fish's interpretive communities explain why that risk varies systematically. A behavioral cue legible as avoidance within one interpretive community may register as stoicism or cognitive difference within another. The gap is a design target, not a guarantee, and the framework makes this explicit rather than eliding it.

6. Operational Character Documents

An operational character document is a prose-governance document. It specifies what the narration may and may not do when inhabiting or observing a character. It is not a character bible, psychological profile, or backstory document. Those documents describe a person. An operational document governs a prose.

The distinction in practice:

> *Descriptive: 'She is perceptive but self-unaware.'*
>
> *Operational: 'The narration renders what she notices but withholds what it means. Physical and behavioral perceptions are permitted; interpretive conclusions are not. Her self-assessments appear in free indirect discourse — narrated monologue in Cohn's terms — without ironic framing or narratorial correction. The reader must feel, not be told, the inadequacy of those assessments.'*

The operational version gives sentence-level instructions. It specifies not who the character is but what the prose may do — with explicit reference to the mode (FID, psychonarration, structural absence) through which the character's consciousness is or is not represented.

The operational character document is best understood as an iterative artefact rather than a purely pre-drafting design. Some constraints are established before the first draft begins; others are codified from discoveries made in the act of drafting — patterns of evasion, displacement, or self-deception that the writer notices after the fact and then formalizes into recoverable rules. The document's primary value lies between drafting and revision: as a stable reference that the writer returns to when testing whether the prose has maintained the constraints across scenes, chapters, and drafts. The relationship between pre-drafting design and revision diagnostic is not a contradiction (addressed further in §12) but a description of how the method actually operates in practice.

This transmissibility is the document's specific practical contribution. A writer relying on intuition may maintain prose constraints in early drafts and lose them under revision pressure. Returning after an interval, they may find their sense of what this character's narration is permitted to do has faded. An editor cannot identify violations of constraints that have never been articulated. The document makes implicit rules legible. A template is provided in §13.

7. Behavioral Mechanics

Behavioral mechanics are repeatable, condition-specific rules translating psychological traits into prose behaviors. They bridge the descriptive and operational levels of character design. The translation has a three-part structure:

> *Condition [situation that activates the behavior] → Behavior [what the character does] → Constraint [what the character does not perceive about what they have done]*

The constraint is the prose rule. Without it, the mechanic remains descriptive. With it, the mechanic is operational: the writer knows what to write and, crucially, what to refrain from writing. The moment the narration registers the character's awareness of the behavioral pattern, the mechanic breaks: self-unawareness becomes asserted rather than performed, and the reader gap collapses in that beat.

Behavioral mechanics are most productive for habitual, recurring behaviors through which character self-limitation is legibly encoded. They are less prescriptive for unique, plot-driven moments, which require the writer's judgment about whether and how to maintain the gap in that specific scene.

8. Structural Absence

Structural absence is the deliberate exclusion of a character from interior access as a prose resource. In its most extreme form: a character present in every major scene who never receives interiority access. The reader constructs this character from external observation — gesture, speech, the response of others, the systematic failure of other characters to read them accurately.

Absence is not lack of depth. It is a controlled channel for depth — a designed Leerstelle in Iser's sense, inviting reader inference precisely because direct access is withheld. The reader's imagination is engaged in completing a figure the prose refuses to complete for them. Structural absence produces the limit case of Fowler's mind-style: a character without POV access has no analyzable cognitive signature, yet their absence shapes the inferential activity of the authorial audience as powerfully as any marked one.

Partial structural absence — a domain from which a character is excluded in prose while narrating freely elsewhere — is equally powerful. A character who narrates professional life with analytical precision and domestic life with systematic vagueness performs structural absence in the domestic domain. The narration approaches and withdraws; the reader maps the withdrawal. Structural absence intersects with focalization but exceeds it in being made at the level of character design rather than scene by scene.

9. Character-Specific Prose Constraints Beyond Voice

As established in §2, voice is a property of stylistic signature; prose permission is a property of epistemic access. A character may exhibit consistent stylistic properties across their narration while operating under domain-specific epistemic constraints: precise and synthesizing in professional contexts, evasive and metonymic in domestic ones. The stylistic signature is unchanged; the prose permissions have shifted — producing in the constrained domain a mind-style characterized by the absence of synthesis, legible to the authorial audience as suppressed interiority.

This domain-specific epistemic variation is the class of design decision that operational character documents are built to formalize:

- This narration may observe physical phenomena precisely but may not synthesize them into emotional conclusions.
- This narration categorizes experience analytically in every domain except the one being avoided; there, the prose becomes evasive and metonymic.
- This narration reports the behavior of others accurately but consistently misattributes motive; the misattribution is never corrected.

Each is a rule about epistemic access, not stylistic signature. Each can survive multiple changes of register, scene-type, and chapter structure.

10. Relation to Existing Craft Pedagogy

The Parallax Framework occupies a specific position among existing craft concepts. Locating it precisely is necessary for intellectual honesty and for precision about what, if anything, it adds.

Show, don't tell is a general stylistic preference applied uniformly across a narrative. Prose constraint is character-specific and domain-specific: it specifies when showing is

permitted, when it is not, and — through structural absence — addresses forms of withholding that the show/tell dichotomy cannot describe at all.

Psychic distance (Gardner) refers to the gradient of narrative immediacy from distant authorial summary to close character stream-of-consciousness. Prose constraints operate within a chosen psychic distance but specify, at that distance, what the narration may interpret and what it may not — a distinction the distance scale cannot make. Subtext — the emotional meaning running beneath the literal surface — is perhaps the closest existing concept to the reader gap. The framework formalizes subtext at the design level: operational constraints specify in advance what categories of meaning the narration will carry subterraneously and through which channels. The objective correlative (Eliot), the iceberg theory (Hemingway), and the filtering concept in craft pedagogy all address adjacent territory: the objective correlative specifies the displacement channels; iceberg omission formalizes structural absence; filtering describes mediation that the framework extends by asking what the filter is permitted to do, not only that it exists.

The character bible describes the person; the operational document governs the prose. Both are necessary. Neither substitutes for the other. The Parallax Framework's specific contribution is the codification of these design decisions into a transmissible, character-specific document format that makes implicit prose rules explicit, revisable, and recoverable across drafts.

11. Examples and Technical Commentary

Example 1: The Self-Exonerating Narrator

A. Descriptive character note

Elena presents herself as a loyal friend. Her pattern — consistently prioritizing her own comfort over the wellbeing of people she loves, then rationalizing the choice — is opaque to her. She does not recognize it as a pattern.

B. Bad explanatory prose

> *Priya had texted at noon: the job offer had fallen through. Elena read it twice. But as she watched the rain, she thought about how tired she was, and told herself Priya would understand. She was good at telling herself things like that — she always found a way to justify whatever she needed. It was a pattern she'd had her whole life.*

The word pattern performs the self-knowledge Elena is not supposed to possess. 'She was good at telling herself things like that' is psychonarration in Cohn's sense — the narrator names the mechanism from outside the character's idiom. The reader gap has collapsed before it can form.

C. Operational prose constraint

The narration reports Elena's self-assessments in narrated monologue — FID — without ironic framing or narratorial correction. Her rationalizations appear as neutral observations. The word tired is permitted; the word selfish is not. Priya's situation occupies at most one clause and is not returned to. Physical comfort is rendered with precision; Priya's need is at the edge of the frame.

D. Revised prose

> *Priya had texted at noon. The job offer — the one she'd been waiting on since February — had fallen through. Elena set her phone down. Outside, the rain came down in grey sheets; she was genuinely tired, the kind of tired that settles in the back of the knees. Her friend would understand. She texted back — Something came up, I'm so sorry — and felt the relief arrive before she'd even put the phone down. She made tea. From the window, the street was empty and wet and very peaceful.*

E. Technical commentary

The revised prose operates almost entirely in narrated monologue: 'Her friend would understand' and 'very peaceful' are FID — the narration has adopted Elena's evaluative register without formally marking her perspective. The undecidability of FID (whether 'her friend would understand' is endorsement or disclosure) is the Leerstelle (Iser) that the reader is invited to fill.

The filling is directed. The behavioral residue — relief arriving before the phone is down — supplies the authorial audience (Rabinowitz) with specific evidence about Elena's priorities without naming it. 'Very peaceful' is Elena's perception, delivered by the prose as though neutral: FID at its most complicit. The mind-style (Fowler) produced by this passage is characterized by precise rendering of physical comfort and systematic abstraction of Priya's need — a cognitive signature whose diagnostic feature is its avoidance of the one domain the situation demands. An authorial audience familiar with self-deceiving narrators will recognize the evasion. A reader from an interpretive community (Fish) that expects transparent narration may read 'Her friend would understand' as simply true. The gap is calibrated for the former; it is not guaranteed.

Example 2: The Perceptually Asymmetric Character (Practice-Derived)

This example is abstracted from the author's own working practice.

A. Descriptive character note

This character reads other people with precision: they track microexpressions, shifts in vocal register, the positioning of hands before someone lies or retreats. Their own emotional life does not appear in their narration as feeling. When interiority surfaces at all, it arrives as physical sensation without attribution — weight, temperature, pressure — never named as emotion and never interpreted as evidence of one.

B. Bad explanatory prose

> *She watched him and knew, with the particular certainty of someone who had learned to read people, that he was lying. It made her sad — not the sharp sad of betrayal but the slow kind, the kind that builds up over years. She had felt it before with him. She felt it again now.*

'It made her sad' names the emotional state directly — psychonarration, the narrator describing from outside. 'She had felt it before with him' awards the character a self-referential emotional history she is not supposed to possess. The external precision ('learned to read people') is immediately undercut by the interior access that follows.

C. Operational prose constraint

The narration renders this character's perception of others with high resolution: facial microexpressions, voice quality, the physical signals that precede evasion or distress. The narration does not name what this character feels about what they perceive. When suppressed interiority appears, it appears as physical sensation without interpretation — weight, temperature, pressure. The character does not reflect on their own emotional patterns. The narration does not describe them as a person who reads people; it demonstrates this capacity by rendering what they read, precisely and without commentary.

D. Revised prose

> *He used the wrong tense — past for something he was still deciding. She noted the slight drop in his right shoulder, the particular quality of the stillness before he said the next word. There was a weight across her sternum that had been there since he started talking. She looked at her hands. 'I see,' she said, because it was true.*

E. Technical commentary

In Cohn's taxonomy, the passage contains no narrated monologue. There is no FID, no adoption of the character's evaluative idiom for emotional content. The perception of others approaches psychonarration — 'she noted' — but stripped of interpretive synthesis: the narrator describes the act of perception without completing it. The passage does not explain what the observed signals mean; it renders them and stops. The weight across the sternum is a displacement channel — physical sensation carrying interiority the narration cannot name, a shaped Leerstelle (Iser) whose content the authorial audience (Rabinowitz) is positioned to supply.

'"I see," she said, because it was true' is narrated monologue only at the level of confirmation, not emotional attribution. The prose tells us the statement is true without telling us what truth costs her. The entire field between 'he used the wrong tense' and 'I see' — the emotional transaction the scene turns on — is the gap the prose refuses to bridge. The mind-style (Fowler) produced by this narration is characterized by outward

acuity and inward reticence: a cognitive signature whose diagnostic feature is its asymmetry. The reader infers the asymmetry from the pattern; the character does not.

Example 3: Structural Absence

A. Descriptive character note

Daniel is the emotional center of the household but expresses nothing directly. He communicates through action, through small offerings, through the management of physical space. Other characters consistently construct inadequate models of him: one reads him as cold, another as steady, a third as difficult to reach. None of them is fully right. He receives no POV chapters.

B. Bad explanatory prose (from Daniel's POV)

> *He found it difficult to put things into words. He'd always been like this — better at doing than saying. He wasn't cold; he felt things deeply. He just couldn't make it come out right.*

Giving Daniel a POV chapter at all dissolves the structural absence. Once he can describe his own interiority — even haltingly — the 'difficulty with words' becomes a personality trait within normal range. He is no longer opaque; he is reticent. Reticence is readable through its own representation; structural absence is not.

C. Operational prose constraint

Daniel has no POV access in any chapter. He appears in every major scene but is rendered entirely from outside: through his actions, his hands, his minimal speech, and the interpretive failures of the characters observing him. Each observing character produces a partial and differently incorrect model of Daniel. The narration gives the reader access only to what can be externally perceived, and to the gap between those perceptions and the observer's attempts to interpret them.

D. Revised prose (from Carla's POV)

> *She'd asked him twice. He hadn't answered either time — not dismissively, just not at all — because he was rinsing the cups, each one separately, setting them upside-down in a row on the drying rack. He was very particular about the rack. When he'd finished, he dried his hands on the towel and turned and said, 'Do you want tea?' She looked at him. Outside, a car went past. She said yes.*

E. Technical commentary

Structural absence produces zero mind-style for Daniel in Fowler's sense: none of Cohn's three modes of consciousness representation applies to him. His perspective is constitutively withheld; there is no linguistic trace of his cognitive world to analyze. What exists instead is the trace of his absence — the Leerstelle he creates in the perceptions of the characters around him.

Focalization is entirely with Carla; Daniel is the focalized object, never the focalizer. The narration renders only what Carla perceives, including her interpretive attempts: 'not dismissively, just not at all' is Carla's gloss on Daniel's silence — her effort to fill the Leerstelle he presents — and the prose offers it as her inference, not as fact. The authorial audience (Rabinowitz) recognizes Carla's model of Daniel as a partial construction. 'She looked at him. Outside, a car went past. She said yes' deflects the interpretive pressure outward — a structural indeterminacy in Iser's sense, where the convergence of perspectives fails to produce determinate meaning. The reader constructs Daniel from the shapes his absence makes in other people's prose.

12. Limitations and Ethical Risks

The Parallax Method has specific failure modes and ethical risks that any responsible account must name.

Reader miscalibration. The gap is designed for Rabinowitz's authorial audience; actual readers vary. Iser's over-filling and under-filling of gaps captures the general risk; Fish's interpretive communities explain its systematic nature. The writer must model the actual reader population, not only the implied one.

Cultural and contextual variation. The behavioral cues through which the reader gap operates are culturally embedded. A gesture that encodes grief in one cultural context may encode stoicism, propriety, or cognitive difference in another. The method assumes shared inferential repertoire; where that is not shared, the gap misfires.

Ethical risks of withheld interiority. When structural absence is applied to a character belonging to a marginalized, disabled, neurodivergent, or culturally distant group, it risks replicating historical practices of literary dehumanization — representing certain figures as opaque, behaviorally defined objects available for interpretation by others rather than subjects of their own consciousness. The method's structural absence tool must be applied with explicit attention to this risk. Withholding interiority from a character whose consciousness has historically been denied literary representation requires different justification from withholding it from a character for whom full interiority access is the norm.

The risk of blankness. Prose constraints not derived from a genuine and detailed understanding of who the character is will produce blankness rather than depth. The reader gap must have something on the character's side of it — a psychology, a history, feelings — even when the prose is not permitted to name them directly. Without that foundation, Iser's blank becomes simply empty rather than structurally generative.

Over-engineering. Prose that is too visibly governed by its constraints can feel mechanical. The operational document is a starting position and a diagnostic tool, not a rigid ruleset. Writers must be prepared to violate constraints when a scene demands it, as long as the violation is deliberate and its consequence for the gap is understood.

Genre constraints. The method is not genre-neutral. Certain genre conventions — resolution of emotional ambiguity, transparency of interiority — may be incompatible with sustained reader-gap design. Applying the framework without accounting for genre-reader expectations may produce work experienced as frustrating rather than resonant.

Method as hybrid artefact. As acknowledged in §6, the operational character document functions both as pre-drafting design and as revision diagnostic. For writers who discover character in the act of drafting, pre-specifying prose constraints may feel artificially restrictive. The document's primary value for many writers will be in capturing and

codifying drafting discoveries, then testing consistency in revision — not in pre-specifying everything before a first draft begins.

13. Practical Appendix: Operational Character Document Template

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The following template is designed to be completed for each significant character in a limited-perspective or free indirect narrative. It is a design and revision tool. Some fields may be completed before drafting; others will emerge from drafting and be formalized for revision.

CHARACTER NAME:

NARRATIVE ROLE: [ ] POV character [ ] Observed character [ ] Structurally absent character

CONSCIOUSNESS REPRESENTATION MODE (Cohn):

[ ] Psychonarration [ ] Narrated monologue (FID) [ ] Structural absence [ ] Mixed — specify domains:

A. PERMITTED PERCEPTIONS

What categories of perception may the narration render for this character?

B. FORBIDDEN INTERPRETATIONS

What interpretive conclusions is the narration NOT permitted to draw from what the character perceives?

C. ALLOWED SELF-VOCABULARY

What words and concepts is this character's FID voice permitted to use about themselves?

D. PROHIBITED SELF-KNOWLEDGE

What truths about themselves is this character not permitted to arrive at within the narration?

E. DISPLACEMENT CHANNELS

Through what objects, sensations, behaviors, or external phenomena does this character's suppressed interiority travel?

F. BEHAVIORAL MECHANICS (list 3–5)

Format: When [condition], the character [behavior]. The narration does not register [constraint].

- [Mechanic 1]
- [Mechanic 2]
- [Mechanic 3]

G. READER-GAP TARGET

What specific understanding should the authorial audience hold about this character that the character does not hold about themselves? (This is the Leerstelle you are designing.)

H. STRUCTURAL ABSENCES

Are there domains from which this character's perspective is wholly excluded? If the character has no POV access at all: what observational channels are permitted?

I. POV-SPECIFIC PROSE CONSTRAINTS

- Emotional experience:
- Relationships:
- Self-assessment:
- Memory:
- The primary avoided domain:

J. VIOLATION CONDITIONS

Under what circumstances, if any, is the writer permitted to violate these constraints?

K. REVISION DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

☐ Does any sentence explicitly name the character's emotional state in their own terms? (Prohibited psychonarration or FID synthesis)

☐ Does the narration explain any behavioral residue that should be left for reader inference?

☐ Does the character arrive at an understanding about themselves that the gap design prohibits?

☐ Does any self-assessment appear with narratorial correction or ironic framing that should be absent?

☐ Are displacement channels rendering something the narration is simultaneously naming directly?

☐ At the end of this scene, does the reader know more about this character than the character knows about themselves? (Gap test)

☐ Has any cultural or behavioral cue been deployed whose inferential legibility has been tested against the actual (not only implied) reader population?

☐ Is the Leerstelle directed enough to produce specific inference, or merely empty?

14. Conclusion

The central claim of this paper can be stated simply: there is design work in fiction that existing craft pedagogy does not adequately name.

When a writer asks whether this character's narration is permitted to name what it is feeling, or whether that naming should be withheld and the weight carried instead by an object or a gesture — that question is not answered by a character bible. It belongs to a distinct category of design decision: the governance of prose behavior around a character, expressed through what the narration is forbidden to do directly.

The Parallax Framework proposes a name for this category, a set of tools for working in it, and a document format for making its decisions explicit and recoverable. It draws on Genette's and Bal's focalization theory — occupying the space those theories open below the level of focalization analysis. It draws on Cohn's three modes of consciousness representation — particularly narrated monologue, whose epistemological undecidability is the primary mechanism of the reader gap. It draws on Fowler's mind-style — distinguishing the analytic description of what is there from the design specification of what should be there. And it grounds the reader gap in Iser's Leerstellen, Rabinowitz's authorial audience, and Fish's interpretive communities — a theoretically precise account of how designed indeterminacy produces meaning and where it misfires.

In my own practice, the framework's most consistent value has been as a revision diagnostic: a stable reference for testing, scene by scene, whether the prose has maintained the constraints I designed for a character — or discovered during drafting — and whether the gap I intended is the gap the authorial audience will actually find. That practical function is the ground from which this paper grew, and it is what I hope the Operational Character Document Template makes available to other writers.

Not who they are, but what the prose is permitted to do: this is where the Parallax Framework locates character.

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